Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Oliver W. Hill, Jr.
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Interviewer:	David Cline
Videographer:	John Bishop
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Unidentified Announcer: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

David Cline: The way that I like to work, if it's okay with you, is I work pretty chronologically. I mean, I always think that the work that people end up doing in their lives is always shaped by their families and where they come from and the communities in which they're raised and all of that. So, I take a pretty, you know, sort of traditional family history approach, at least to where we start.

Oliver Hill: That sounds good.

David Cline: Great. And then, and certainly, in your case, I know there will be a lot of rich relevant memories pertinent to the Civil Rights Movement, but we'll talk about other things, as well.

Oliver Hill: Okay.

David Cline: And then carry on through your life and to your own career, and where you see these things sort of playing out.

Oliver Hill: Okay.

David Cline: If that sounds good to you.

Oliver Hill: Sounds good.

David Cline: It's really—it's your interview. You're in charge. If you want to take a break at any point, if you want to take it in a completely different direction, it's up to you. We're very informal in that way.

Oliver Hill: Okay.

David Cline: And we would really want you to be in charge of where we go.

Oliver Hill: Sounds good.

David Cline: And I will also try to keep us all on track.

Oliver Hill: Please! [Laughs]

David Cline: [Laughs] And we usually go—they vary from forty minutes, forty-five minutes or so to two hours, but as much time as you want to give us. And I think we're good for time, in terms of our flight.

Oliver Hill: Okay.

David Cline: Great. What I'll do first is just record a little opening message for the file so that we know where we were and when, and then we'll start having our conversation.

Oliver Hill: Sounds good.

John Bishop: Okay, [1:38] is running.

David Cline: Oh, with all that. Okay, great! [Laughs] So, today is August seventeenth, 2013. We are in Richmond, Virginia. My name is David Cline from the Department of History at

Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, also working with the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. We are here today for the Civil Rights History Project with the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Behind the camera is John Bishop from Media Generation and UCLA. And we are very pleased to be here today with Oliver W. Hill, Jr. in Richmond. And good morning.

Oliver Hill: Good morning.

David Cline: And thank you so much for being part of this project.

Oliver Hill: My pleasure.

David Cline: Okay, great. Thank you. So, what we'll do is we'll just start by talking a bit about your childhood and your family. And then, we'll have a good conversation going forward.

Oliver Hill: Okay.

David Cline: So, if you'll just tell us when you were born and where and a little bit about the community in which you were raised.

Oliver Hill: I was born in 1949 in Richmond, Virginia. And, of course, in those days, Richmond was a very segregated community, so I was born in the black hospital, which now is a dorm at Virginia Union University. [Laughs] And in those days, the black community was, you know, its own circumscribed world. I mean, you really didn't have to go outside of it if you didn't want to. The pharmacy was down the street, and the restaurants were in the same neighborhood, and you kind of circled in that neighborhood. And that was kind of the hub of my life for the first twelve years or so that I was alive.

DC: Were there certain fixtures within that community, certain people who had—that were sort of heads of the community, or certain businesses that were sort of like—?

OH: Yeah. One of the things that was interesting was that the neighborhoods were very heterogeneous, you know, you would have a lawyer next to a construction worker next to a plumber, and so, in terms of class, you had much more integration than you do today. And, again, because there were so many restrictions on where you could go and where you couldn't go, you know, there were industries and commercial organizations to take care of whatever needs you had in the community. So, in that sense, it was a very self-contained kind of community.

And, I mean, my family was atypical in one sense, in that my father was a civil rights attorney, and so he was traveling a lot. And he was involved with cases from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. We, as a result, would have a lot of threats coming in over the telephone. And so, I wasn't allowed to answer the phone for a long time [laughs] in the evenings. We even had a cross burned on our yard one time.

DC: Do you remember that?

OH: Yeah, I was probably about six or seven. But, you know, it was exciting! [Laughs] I mean, my parents had consciously tried to kind of build up my sense of self so that I would be shielded [0:05:00] a little bit from the racism and the kinds of reprisals and repercussions that were coming from my father's work. And also, I think they also figured that I was going to be in the group that desegregated schools in Richmond, and I was, so there was an attempt to try to inculcate in me the idea that prejudice was somebody else's problem, you know. It was an indication of their pathology, not my pathology.

And that worked to a certain extent. Although, in looking back on growing up in the fifties, I mean, the all-white world that you would see on television and the media definitely had an effect on me. I mean, when I would color in a coloring book, I would never think about coloring somebody's skin brown, because the norm was white. You know, I wanted wavy hair

like Elvis Presley and [laughs]—so those kinds of marks were definitely there. But I did have a good sense of self, and my parents had done a good job in protecting me on that level.

DC: When you mention Elvis Presley and those kinds of things that are happening psychologically, did you have other heroes as a kid?

OH: Well, I mean, most of the heroes that I was exposed to in TV and comic books and things were white, and so I was kind of a typical kid on that level. There really wasn't a real push for black history at that time, and so I really hadn't been exposed to a lot of black heroes, although my parents had always talked to me about, you know, the heroes of the black experience. It wasn't a lot of written material on that, but they would, you know, tell me about it in the conversations around the dinner table. And I was an only child, so they did include me in their discussions, you know, for the most part, about issues of segregation and politics and anything else that might be happening around that time.

DC: Could you tell us a little bit more about who your parents were, where they—what their backgrounds were and how they came to be doing that work?

OH: Um-hmm. My father was also born in Richmond in 1907, and early on, he moved to Roanoke. His father kind of deserted the family early on, so he was being raised by his mother. And in Roanoke, she would go for seasonal work up to places like—what's the name of the resort hotels out there? I'm drawing a blank. Homestead and the Greenbriar.

DC: Oh, right.

OH: And so, he was kind of put in this foster home of this middle class family in Roanoke, who did a lot of raising of him during those early years, named the Pentecosts. And Mr. Pentecost—

DC: A black family?

OH: Black family, yeah. But Mr. Pentecost was a very, I don't know, well-read, well-spoken, very stern kind of person who worked on the railroads. And my father was, you know, kind of living in that environment, and I think that had a big influence on his early years. My grandmother remarried and eventually moved to Washington with her new husband. And so, my father stayed in Roanoke until he was ready to enter high school, because at that time there were no black high schools in Roanoke.

DC: None?

OH: None. [Laughs] So, he then went to Washington for high school. And he went to a high school named Dunbar, which was a very prestigious high school in those days. It was said they had more PhDs on their high school faculty than some of the colleges in the area. [Laughs]

DC: Um-hmm, which is actually not atypical of black schools in that era.

OH: Right, it's true.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

OH: So, he had a great experience at Dunbar and kind of, you know, kind of got his academic footing. But he was still kind of a devil-may-care type personality and—but he decided that he was going to go to college. And just before that, one of his uncles had worked in a law office and gave him a copy of an annotated Constitution. And [0:10:00] he said, in reading that, he couldn't understand why segregation laws were constitutional. And this is really what inspired him to go on to law school.

So, there was a convergence of things happening at that time at Howard in the late 1920s. There was a president there, Mordecai Johnson, who was interested in producing a topflight law school. At that time, Howard's law school was just a night school. But he brought in a dean who

had just got his PhD in law from Harvard, named Charles Hamilton Houston, and so, Mordecai Johnson and Houston kind of molded the faculty and the organization of this law school.

And so, Howard also had a program where you could do three years of undergraduate and then go to law school and get your bachelor's degree after the first year in law school. And so, my father took advantage of that. One of his classmates was Thurgood Marshall, who had been turned down from going to the University of Maryland Law School, so he was there for that reason. And they said that the first day in class, Charles Hamilton Houston told them that, you know, as lawyers, you're either a social parasite or you're a social engineer. [Laughs] And he was determined they were going to become social engineers.

And from that very first year, and that first class, Charles Hamilton Houston was kind of guiding the strategy of attacking segregation, mainly in the form of *Plessy versus Ferguson*, which was the Supreme Court case that had established "separate but equal." My father tells the story that, in that time when he was in college in the 1920s, that you couldn't even get a law passed against lynching because of the power of the Southern bloc in Congress. And so, that was one of the things that convinced him that it would take something going to the Supreme Court to make a real change. And so, that was part of his motivation, as well.

So, when he got out of law school, in 1933, he went back to Roanoke to start to practice. But this was the middle of the Depression, and he was having a hard time making a living, so he started waiting tables to [laughs] earn money.

DC: Yeah.

OH: But at the same time, and I can't remember the name of the person, but there was a white individual from a wealthy family who gave a large donation to the NAACP, which was used to kind of bankroll the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. And so, Charles Hamilton Houston,

and Thurgood Marshall, and my father, and several other lawyers were working with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and starting to look for these cases to gradually assault segregation.

DC: So, did the NAACP—they called on your father to join them?

OH: Yeah. Well, I mean, there was this, you know, close circle of black lawyers, because almost all of them were Howard graduates.

DC: Right, right.

OH: And so, they all knew each other, and so, they all continued to work together.

DC: Yeah.

OH: Yeah.

DC: So, Howard really—the Howard Law School under Houston, I mean, that was one of these key places, in your opinion, where—?

OH: Yeah, definitely it was.

DC: That fired up the Movement.

OH: And it was a conscious effort on the part of Houston and Mordecai Johnson to do this. So, in the 1930s, one of the first big cases that they had some success with was the school salary case, I mean, the teacher salary case in Virginia. In those days, the highest-paid black teacher had to make less than the lowest-paid white teacher. [Laughs] So, that was kind of an easy case to take, although it took several years before it was finally resolved, and it was in the 1940s, I think, it was finally resolved.

But my father, you know, started working in Virginia, and by this time, he had moved back to Richmond. And then, he was in his forties but he got drafted for World War II. [Laughs] And he thinks it was, you know, kind of a conscious decision with the local draft board to try to get him out of their hair. But once he got in the Army, he got to the level of sergeant. He kept

pressing for them to send him to Officer Training School as a lawyer. And they would usually transfer him somewhere else before they got to that point.

DC: So, here's this guy with a law degree, [0:15:00] and they're not taking advantage of that at all.

OH: Right. And even in England, he was, again, kicking up a fuss about getting to Officer Candidate School, and that actually caused his unit to be a little bit late, and otherwise he probably would have been in D-Day. But his unit came over a little bit later.

DC: Um-hmm. And he was serving in an all-black unit?

OH: Yes, um-hmm.

DC: Yeah, in England?

OH: Right, and then into France. Then, when he came back from the war, he started getting involved with local politics here in Richmond. And he was one of the first blacks—I guess he was the first black to be elected to an office in the deep South since Reconstruction. He was elected to the Richmond City Council.

DC: Do you remember anything about that campaign?

OH: Well, that was before I was born. [Laughs]

DC: That was before—yeah, [laughs] right.

OH: But he did have several other campaigns after I was born, and I do remember those. He ran for House of Delegates and lost by forty votes, I think. It was some really close race in the early fifties. But he was always involved in the Virginia Democratic Party. And so, and even when he was running for city council, he didn't just confine his race to the black community. He would go around to white communities, knock on doors, and ask them for their vote. So, he was always kind of fearless in that way. [Laughs]

DC: Um-hmm.

OH: And he always attended every meeting, you know, of any kind of political thing that was going on in Richmond. It didn't matter whether it was conservative or liberal, he would be there, voicing his opinion. And, of course, you know, all this time, they were continuing with the strategy of overturning *Plessy*. And they finally found some—the cases that they thought were going to be the ones they needed, particularly the Clarendon County case in South Carolina.

And it was around that time that he got a call from Barbara Johns in Farmville. And, of course, they were planning to have this boycott, or walkout at their school, because of the conditions.

DC: Yeah, just for the record, for those who are new to this history, could you tell us a little bit about who Barbara Johns was and what was going on in Farmville?

OH: Yeah. Well, Barbara Johns was a high school girl, and the black high school in Farmville was in really bad condition. And I think they were, you know, in some kind of tarpaper shacks out in back for some of the overflow. And the rain would come in, and they would have dripping water on their desks. Anyway, Barbara Johns kind of organized the students to come up with a protest, and they were going to have a walkout and refuse to go back until the conditions had changed.

And she called my father to come and represent them, because the school board was, you know, upset about all this. And their parents were upset because, you know, they were kind of in precarious positions. And at this time, my father, you know, they kind of had their plates full, particularly—and they thought they had all the cases they needed for this push to the Supreme Court. But Barbara Johns was so persistent and so organized that he just couldn't resist her. So, they decided to come and at least visit Farmville and talk to the parents.

And, by this time, they had started to change their strategy. When they first started attacking segregation, it was on the basis of "separate but equal," and no southern state had the resources to have completely equal educational facilities for the black kids. And so, that was the vulnerable point. But by this time, they had decided they were going to change their strategy and start to attack segregation *per se*.

So, in Farmville, that was one of the things he told the parents, because the children organized this meeting with parents and everybody for the lawyers to come in and talk. And one of the things he said was, you know, "This is about desegregation *per se*, not just about separate but equal," and kind of let them know what they would be in for. It would be a relatively long fight. [0:20:00] But the community was ready to support it. So, that case, *Davis v. Prince Edward County*, became one of the cases that was part of the *Brown* package. I guess it was alphabetical, so it was Brown, led by Brown against Stalling.

JB: David, I'm going to close the file.

OH: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're going.

DC: Okay, great. So, that's the Farmville?

OH: Farmville, yeah.

DC: And that went on for quite some time?

OH: Well, this was, I think, '52 when Barbara Johns first called him. And it was '54 before the time the case was finally decided by the Supreme Court. By that time, Barbara Johns, you know, suffered a lot. She eventually had to leave Farmville because of the pressures that

were mounting against her. She comes from an interesting family, too. Her father was Reverend—I can't remember his first name now. Do you?

DC: Vernon Johns was her uncle.

OH: Vernon Johns was her uncle.

DC: Yeah. Her father's name I don't remember either.

OH: And Vernon Johns, who was in Petersburg for a while, eventually went down to Alabama, and he was at the church right before Martin Luther King came. So, there's a lot of connections to Virginia to this early civil rights activity. Although most people think the Civil Rights Movement started in the 1950s, but [laughs] you know, thirty years before, they were starting these cases in the court. In fact, ten years before Rosa Parks, my father's firm had a case with Irene Morgan, and it was the same kind of story: she refused to give up her seat on the bus. This was an interstate bus, and eventually that case led to segregation on interstate transportation being ruled illegal. Yeah. So, yeah, there were a lot of precursors to Martin Luther King in the fifties.

DC: Um-hmm. And then, the Interstate Travel Law was the one that they used, testing that, to push—

OH: Right.

DC: Into the South.

OH: With the Freedom Rides, um-hmm. Yeah.

DC: Very interesting. So, did you get the sense from your father that *he* had a sense of this being an incremental, one step at a time, kind of—?

OH: Yeah, for sure. And, you know, from the time he left law school until the *Brown* decision, that was, you know, almost twenty-some years. So, they did see this as this incremental

strategy. And, again, *changing* strategy, because they started out with attacking "separate but equal" and then eventually attacking segregation itself.

And it was interesting because, in those days, because Richmond was segregated, when the lawyers would come through town, they would always stay with us, because [laughs] they couldn't stay in the hotels downtown. There were a few black hotels around, like Eggleston's and Slaughter's, but they usually tended to stay with us. So, there would be these little strategy sessions around the breakfast table, and I would be off in the corner somewhere. But I didn't know exactly what was going on, but I just knew something important was happening. And, you know, Thurgood Marshall and Bob Carter and some of the other lawyers would always be through town. So, it was an interesting time.

DC: And your father's partner was Spottswood Robinson.

OH: Spottswood Robinson, right.

DC: And when did they start working together?

OH: Well, they started in the forties, and they continued to be partners through the fifties. And then, Spott Robinson went to Howard to be the dean of the law school and then, eventually, a federal judge there.

But one of the things that was interesting was that all the lawyers for the NAACP thought that once the Supreme Court made its decision, that would be it. That would be the law of the land, everybody would comply, and, you know, the country would be changed. And, of course, Virginia led the push for "massive resistance" to resist the desegregation order. And, you know, who knows what kind of effect that had on the country? We probably could be in the post-racial society now, maybe, if that law had been complied with.

DC: Can you talk about some of the actual responses from the white community that made up massive resistance?

OH: Well, they were led by members of the Byrd machine here in Virginia. The governor at the time was J. Lindsay Almond. [0:25:00] And so, it was at the highest level that this resistance was coming. And, you know, this was kind of unheard of, that governors and state legislatures were going to just defy the law. [Laughs] And so, a whole new set of cases had to start to be put together to try to force compliance. And so, I guess, for the next ten years or so, that was the nature of the cases.

I was in one of the first group of students in Virginia to desegregate the schools, and it wasn't until the 1960s, and so, that was like seven years after the *Brown* decision. And for most of Virginia, desegregation didn't come for another five or six years.

DC: Um-hmm. So, even here in Richmond—what level school was it that you were in?

OH: I was in junior high school at the time at Chandler.

DC: And it was a court case that was brought?

OH: Well, this was—it wasn't a specific case, but this was a continual fight that they had. In those days, they had something they called the Pupil Placement Board, and the Pupil Placement Board would decide what schools you would go to. And it was interesting, though, the head of the school board at that time was Lewis Powell, who was a fairly progressive individual. He and my father had a really good relationship. And so, he would always, you know, give my father an opportunity to speak before the school board and before other community groups. So, you know, there was a gradual trickle of black students that were starting to be allowed into the white schools. But it was definitely not integration, and my father would say, "It was desegregation, but not integration," [laughs] just a token number of students.

DC: Can you tell us a little bit about what that difference is, as he saw it and as you saw it?

OH: Well, as he saw it, it was mainly in term of numbers. [Laughs] If you had two black kids in a high school of fifteen hundred, [laughing] he wouldn't say that was an integrated school. It might be desegregated, but it's not integrated.

DC: I'm also—right now, I'm looking at the military during the Korean War, and it's the same—[laughs] it's the same thing when you say "integrated services," and they send a single black soldier to a white unit.

OH: Right.

DC: What is that?

OH: Yeah, yeah. But, you know, the military probably was one of the most progressive institutions in terms of eventual integration, once the presidential directive was given. But, so there was—

DC: And your own case, yeah, your own experience?

OH: Yeah. So, you know, I really didn't want to be [laughs] one of these students who was integrating the schools. I wanted to go to one of the black schools with all my friends. But, you know, it was interesting that it was inevitable, based on what my father was doing. [Laughs] But they would do such ridiculous things as take out yardsticks and measure the distance from one school to another to try to keep kids out. I can remember one friend of mine who wasn't allowed in Chandler, which was the white junior high school, because Graves, which was the black school, was three feet closer to his house than Chandler. So, there was a lot of that kind of stuff going on.

But eventually, you know, we did start to trickle in. And so, I can remember the first day of going to the white junior high school. And my father had been working in the Kennedy campaign, and he got a job at the—was given a job at the Federal Housing Administration during the Kennedy administration, so he was in Washington most of the week these days. And I remember the first day of school, I was given a ride with his new junior partner, who was Henry Marsh, gave me a ride to school that morning. And I was walking up the steps, and it was like the school was deserted out in front. There was nobody, no teachers, no movement, no nothing. It was just me walking up these steps. And then, I went in the principal's office, and there were other black kids there in the principal's office. And then, they marched us out, two by two, to the different homerooms. [Laughs] You know, they kind of had us parceled out around the school. So, it was a kind of interesting, surrealistic day.

DC: But no big backlash on that day? [0:30:00]

OH: No big backlash on that day. You know, after a while, you started to sort things out. And you would know the kids and the areas where you would tend to get called "nigger," or, you know, some other problem would happen. And you would tend to avoid those situations as much as possible. And, of course, the black kids mainly, you know, kept together.

But over the years, you know, gradually people started to get to know one another. I mean, that class—it was in the seventh grade then—kind of went all the way through high school. And, by the time I got to high school, I was on the football team, and so, you know, the real problem kids were also on the football team. And so, you kind of got to know them, and they got to be teammates. And it was kind of like, you know, the way in which people envision integration working, that you live together, you go together, you kind of acknowledge the humanity that you share. And even those who were most prejudiced at the seventh grade were

gradually, you know, starting to become at least friendly, if not friends, by the time we got to high school.

DC: But changing minds one person at a time.

OH: Yeah.

DC: But—

OH: But, of course—

DC: That's a lot to take on when you're a teenager.

OH: Yeah, it is. But by the time I got to high school, or maybe a year or two after I left high school, there was a black girl who was the prom queen in that same school. So, there really was starting to be kind of, even a little bit of social integration in schools. When I was there, it was still pretty much social segregation. We ate together in the cafeteria and we, if we went to a dance at the high school, we would have our area where we would be dancing, and they would have their area. But gradually, that started to change. But, of course, as soon as things started to gradually integrate, then you had the resegregation with white flight with busing that came in the late 1960s. So, you know, had the experiment continued, you know, again, things might be a little different now.

DC: And Richmond did experience a lot of that white flight.

OH: Oh, yeah! Once busing was instituted as a remedy. And one other courageous figure at that time was Judge Robert Merhige, who is a local judge here in Richmond, who ordered busing patterns that included the surrounding counties. And, I mean, just to show how these little circumstances led to some really important ramifications, that solution, you know, would have really had a big impact. I mean, we still have this tension between the city and the counties today, as a result—I mean, kind of a leftover from those old racial politics days. And Merhige

was—you know, he also got a lot of threats. His dog was killed. You know, his children were threatened. And when the case went to, I don't know which circuit it was, but it was overturned.

And then, it went to the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court then, Nixon had just nominated—um, the former chief justice. What was his name? I'm having a senior moment here. Rehnquist! And also, he had tried to nominate Harrold Carswell, but that didn't—that was blocked by the Senate. And so, he nominated Lewis Powell. And Lewis Powell and Rehnquist got on the bench. They hadn't heard the original arguments for this case. And Powell, because of his previous association with the Richmond school board, recused himself, and Rehnquist didn't. [Laughs] And so, the Supreme Court had a four-four split, which meant that the lower court finding was upheld. And so, the inclusion of the counties in the busing plan, you know, fell through. But had Powell not recused himself, or had Rehnquist recused himself, this might be a different world now. [Laughs] [0:35:00] But anyway—

DC: I've done some work in Louisville, which is interesting, because they've just—at the same time that they passed busing, they collapsed—they just collapsed county and city government into one, as one way to get around it.

OH: Yeah. Because in Richmond, it's really interesting the way racial politics works. At first, once in the late sixties and early seventies, when you did have this white flight—of course, now you had much more black political power in Richmond. And so, the white political structure in Richmond started to annex territory from the surrounding counties. And that was eventually blocked by the federal government based on the Voting Rights Act, because it was an attempt to dilute the strength of the black vote. So, they couldn't annex anymore. So, now, you had continued white flight, and now the legislature—once blacks got in power, and Richmond passed

the law that Richmond could no longer annex any territory, so it's landlocked. All the tax base is moving out to the counties.

And this is a pattern that you see all over and over again in cities. But Richmond and Virginia is unique, in that usually you do have cities embedded in a county, but in Richmond you have these independent cities. And so, you know, even to this day, the same struggles between the counties and the cities are there. Now, it's clothed more in class kinds of issues, but it's—the race issue morphed into a class issue, because you had a lot of black flight, too, black middle class flight.

DC: But, in your opinion, the race issue is still embedded in there?

OH: Oh, it's still in there, yeah. But it's, you know, it's kind of tamped down.

JB: I'm going to close the file.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: So, were you—you mentioned this a little bit, but were you a little bit miffed at your dad or your folks that you were put forth as an experiment or—? [Laughs]

OH: I was a little bit miffed, but [laughs] I kind of recognized that, you know, the cause was good. And, you know, I still had a lot of social connections to the kids going to the black schools, because that was still our social group.

DC: How did you get to school? I mean, you talked about the first day, but how did you get to school during the rest of the—?

OH: Most of the time I walked. It really wasn't—Chandler is just—we lived in North Side over here on Overbrook Road, and it was just about maybe eight or ten blocks from Chandler.

DC: And then, after high school, you went on to—?

OH: I went to Howard University. And that was an interesting time, too, in the late sixties, because Howard was a hotbed of political activity, and Black Power and African history and all these things that were starting to emerge. And so, you know, for me, it was kind of an eye-opening time. I was fortunate to have, for example, a history class with one of the eminent scholars on African history, whose name just went out of my head, but I'll think of it in a minute. But I had never heard anything about Africa up until that time, other than Tarzan movies, [laughs] but nothing in terms of African civilizations or any of that kind of thing. So, that was eye-opening.

And, of course, there were a lot of, you know, black revolutionaries on campus, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, and the idea of Black Power. So, there was definitely a change starting to happen then, from Martin Luther King, nonviolent protest, kind of passive protest, the idea of integration to the idea of, you know, kind of Black Nationalism kind of thing among the black intellectuals at Howard.

DC: And where was your mind then?

OH: Ah, my mind was—you know, I was kind of persuaded by that argument. I mean, most of it was kind of just rebellion of what I was familiar with, you know. Didn't want to be a black bourgeoisie anymore, you know. [Laughs] So, you know, that might have held sway for a year or two, but [laughs] gradually, [0:40:00] I mean, my thinking kind of moved in other directions. This is when I first started to get interested in Eastern philosophy and meditation and things like that. So, I think that was kind of, you know, I can see it as a continuum of my experience as a child growing up in the segregated South, that you really have to do a lot of introspection and you have to really think about your sense of self, in terms of, you know, these

people don't like me because of skin color, and it causes, you know, a lot of those kinds of self-inquiries to occur.

And that continued, and eventually in college, it took a more inward turn. And, you know, I found that some of these books in Indian philosophy really spoke to me. And I wasn't—I was a history major, but as a senior, I took a course in perception in psychology. And that also had a big influence on me, the idea that in many ways we construct our reality, you know, based on our expectancies and our beliefs and our previous experiences. So, that's—you know, it was too late to change my major then, but I did go into psychology in graduate school. But in between graduating from university and going to grad school, I studied meditation more and became a meditation teacher, first in Boston and then in Detroit. And that's—I got to the University of Michigan.

DC: It's interesting—I'm thinking about you're really putting that together, the idea—you know, I often think about, in practicing the strategy of nonviolence, in particular, or just handling oneself with dignity and trying to be nonreactive or thoughtful about one's reaction, that really is a process of mindfulness.

OH: Yeah, it is.

DC: And you're really—you're already thinking in those terms back then?

OH: By the time I got to college, yeah. Well, by the time I started—this was kind of late in my college career I started discovering Indian philosophy. I mean, I had kind of, you know, heard about Gandhi and I knew he had some influence on King, but I really didn't know that much about Gandhi's story or other aspects of Indian philosophy or *ahimsa* or what, you know, any of—what that meant or the implications.

DC: Were there others at Howard that were getting into this or were you considered a—?

OH: I was pretty out there by myself, [laughs] yeah. I mean, meditation is very mainstream these days, but it—

DC: But not.

OH: In those days it was, yeah, not so much. [Laughs]

DC: Interesting.

OH: Yeah.

DC: So, then on to Michigan, you say?

OH: Yeah. There was one other point I wanted to make, though, about my early years. When I was in those segregated schools in Richmond, growing up, the quality of the teachers was just amazing. I mean, there were some kind of unintended consequences of integration. I think one of the losses was the quality of the black teachers that we had in those classrooms, women, for the most part. And so, again, this is another kind of confluence of things but, you know, the women's movement was very big in the sixties, also. And so, at one time, all the best and brightest women went into teaching. And so, now they had wider possibilities, and we didn't really put anything in place to attract the best and brightest into education anymore. And I think black education has suffered more than the education in general, because of the, you know, these other influences: white flight, tax base erosion, poor resources in the inner cities.

I mean, I now work a lot with Petersburg, and, you know, they have the lowest performing schools in the state, because it's—it's kind of a desperate situation. They lost their tax base a number of years ago when the tobacco companies moved out. I just saw yesterday they're getting ready to lose a chemical plant, too. But when you have a school district like that, it becomes this spiraling kind of downward pattern, because even if you get some decent teachers, [0:45:00] they immediately get recruited away, because they can make more money at

surrounding districts and have half the headaches. And so, it becomes very difficult to recruit people into those kinds of school districts. And administrators—since I started working with the schools in 2005, there have been four superintendents in that time in Petersburg.

DC: Was there something lost, do you think, when the schools desegregated with—you're talking about administrators—the black principals and some of the black teachers that had been working in the black school system—?

OH: Right.

DC: And as things change, you know, what happens to them?

OH: Yeah, and most of the principals were not given principalships again when things integrated. Yeah. And, you know, the teachers—I mean, for one thing, most of the black educators during the era of segregation kind of saw themselves on a mission, you know, that education was the key for upward mobility, and, you know, that would be driven in. And, again, you didn't have this kind of class segregation that we have now in the black schools, because kids from the middle class, the lower middle class, everybody was there in the same school. And so, there was this sense of kind of shared values and things that would get inculcated. Whereas, now, you know, the black middle class is out in the suburbs with the white middle class. And so, in the inner city, you mainly have, you know, kind of these hubs of poverty and, you know, lack of role models, lack of resources.

DC: So, then it becomes sort of that's—those are different people entirely and that's their problem—

OH: Yeah.

DC: From the point of view of those in the suburbs.

OH: Right. And, again, it still has a strong racial component to that, but you do have class kind of overlaying with that, as well.

DC: And has that been the case here in Richmond?

OH: Oh, definitely, yeah. I mean, I think that's one of the main things holding Richmond back is this lack of cooperation between the city and the surrounding counties. And, you know, if you talk to the leaders in the counties, none of them would say race has anything to do with it these days. But the seeds of this were definitely in the racial politics, you know, even though it's morphed into other things these days.

DC: How has Richmond recognized its change in the legacy of the Movement, and has Richmond recognized your father's contributions?

OH: Yeah, Richmond has. We had a succession of governors that have attempted to, you know, kind of add the black story to Virginia history. That was another thing that was interesting when I first went to white schools and we would take a Virginia history class. [Laughs] And when you read about slavery, [laughs] it was such a benign institution, you know, they were just like family members, you know, everybody loved everybody. And, [laughs] you know, even from my brief experience, I knew that was a lot of crap. [Laughs] But that was what was being taught. And so, you can understand why, you know, the larger white community doesn't understand what the problem is, or why we're still talking about slavery a hundred and fifty years later.

So, I forgot your question, but [laughs]—

DC: If Virginia, and Richmond, in particular, had—

OH: Oh, yeah.

DC: Tried to correct things in some way.

OH: Started to acknowledge, yeah.

DC: Or at least made a, you know, a semblance of trying to.

OH: Yeah.

DC: And have they recognized the Movement and your father?

OH: I think, you know, this started with, oh, the election of Doug Wilder, and you had George Allen in there, but there have been a succession of Democratic governors who have attempted to acknowledge the black contribution to Virginia history, and particularly to civil rights history. I mean, in the forties and fifties and sixties, more cases, civil rights cases, were brought in Virginia than any other southern state. And—

DC: Why is that? I mean, your father and Mr. Robinson? [Laughs]

OH: [Laughs] Well, yeah, I guess they were just kind of active. But, you know, there was a kind of a climate here. There was a willingness to make that sacrifice among the populace. [0:50:00] And part of it might have been that Virginia, you know, for all of its problems, was never Mississippi, you know. I mean, even though we had lynchings here and we had problems—again, Barbara Johns got run out of Farmville—you didn't have that constant kind of violence that you had further in the South. And so, maybe that created a climate where people felt a little safer to come forward and stand up against some of these segregation laws. That's a possibility anyway.

DC: So, more monuments and things like that began to appear on the landscape—

OH: Yeah.

DC: To recognize that there is more than Civil War generals.

OH: Right. And, [laughs] well, first there was the Arthur Ashe statue on Monument Avenue, and that caused a big uproar.

DC: Um-hmm. And briefly, can you tell us a little bit about—I mean, just for the record, because I think it's an interesting story—the Monument Avenue and what monuments were there?

OH: Well, Monument Avenue was an avenue of monuments to Confederate generals, for the most part. And so, you have—and the statues, you know, are all huge statues, particularly of Robert E. Lee. The statues would be facing a certain direction. They were facing the south if they survived the war. They were facing north if they were killed in the war. So, it's a very stately street. And so, then the proposal came to erect a statue to Arthur Ashe, and it was decided by the city council to put in on Monument Avenue. And, of course, a lot of people came out of the woodwork, complaining about this, that it was kind of a sacrilege.

I mean, it's so interesting. And I think one of the reasons Virginia is changing is because kind of the old genteel Virginia, which was never as overtly racist as people further south, but it would still rear its head every now and then [laughs] with these kinds of things. I mean, there was a big objection to putting a statue of Lincoln at the Tredegar Iron Works, which was a building left over from the Civil War. But—and this was like ten years ago, fifteen years ago. And you would say, "Objection to a statue of Lincoln, you know, in these days?" It just was unbelievable. But it's "heritage, not hate," you know [laughs].

DC: Um-hmm. [52:37], too, and especially in southwest Virginia, it can be pretty wacky sometimes.

OH: Yeah.

DC: People are really still, you know, playing on violins about the war.

OH: Yeah, I mean, it's the war that never ends, you know, [laughs] and "the South will rise again."

JB: I'm going to close.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

DC: So, as a kid going downtown, these were the figures that towered over you?

OH: Yes.

DC: And then, Ashe was added, and others?

OH: No others yet on Monument Avenue. But they did put in this memorial to Virginia civil rights history on the capitol grounds, which pictures Barbara Johns on one side, and my father and Spott Robinson on one side. And it's just an acknowledgement of Virginia's role in the Civil Rights Movement. And, of course, it's right down from a statue of Harry Byrd, [laughs], so it's an interesting juxtaposition.

And also, they named a building for my father on the capitol grounds, the old Finance Building. And there's an irony about that, too, because that was the place where Byrd and Almond and some of the others kind of worked out their initial strategy for "massive resistance," in that same building. And it was also a building where, when my father graduated from law school, he went there to take the bar exam. And, of course, the seating was segregated. And he came in late, and the only seat he saw was upfront, which was in the white section, so he went and sat down there. [Laughs] And so, there was a bit of a row, but I think they eventually let him sit there. And so, all that's in that same building.

DC: But seeing his name on it, most people don't know this, those backstories.

OH: Right, that's true, yeah.

DC: And nationally, how has your father and his work been recognized?

OH: Well, in the last ten years of his life—he lived to be a hundred. And so, for the last ten years of his life, he did get a lot of national recognition, which was good that he was able to get that before he died. And in 1999, President Clinton gave him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which was the highest civilian honor. [0:55:00] He—

DC: And that's the medal there?

OH: Yes, uh-huh.

DC: [Speaking to JB] Is it possible to get that shot?

JB: Yeah. Okay, we're going over for a shot.

DC: [Laughs] Just for a second.

JB: This will take a—I'm just going to let the camera run and do it.

DC: So, that's the Presidential Medal of Freedom that was awarded in—

OH: 1999.

DC: '99, sorry, '99

JB: And is that your father's bust there?

OH: Yes, uh-huh. [Pause for filming]

JB: Okay, give me a second to get everything back to normal.

OH: Um-hmm.

DC: I just wanted to make sure we have a shot of that to bring in, if need be.

OH: Right. [Pause]

JB: Okay, I think we can keep going.

DC: Great. So, I want to shift to asking you about your career in psychology and how some of these concerns/interests/themes may have played into your work.

OH: Yeah. Well, my whole career has been at Virginia State University, which is a historically black university. So, you know, just kind of being in that environment, you're reminded of all of this history, because Virginia State and most of the other HBCUs were founded to provide an opportunity for blacks in states to have a higher education. They didn't want them to come to the white institutions. And, you know, our colors are orange and blue because we used to get hand-me-downs from UVA [laughing] for football and for other things.

DC: I didn't know that.

OH: Yeah. [Laughs]

DC: That was why. Interesting.

OH: And, you know, over the years, it's been interesting to see the politics around, you know, state allocations for higher education with VSU. In Virginia, you know, we have a system that's unlike many states. I mean, in North Carolina, you have one state system. In Virginia, we have Tech and UVA; and then we have kind of a second-tier now of VCU and George Mason, maybe; and then, [laughs] the rest of us. But, you know, so just being in that setting, you know, just kind of creates a lot of reminders of those kinds of things.

And a lot of my research has been done on black education and cognitive factors. And it's been interesting, you know, looking at this thing about U.S. education and, you know, the thinking from *Brown* forward, how the current state is really the latest iteration of those same issues that were there fifty or sixty years ago. I mean, now, of course, we know about the effect of nutrition on education and early childhood, medical attention, and cognitive stimulation. I mean, one of the things that is definitely a key element of the lagging of black educational achievement nationwide is this lack of early childhood stimulation. But we know now that these cognitive abilities that in the fifties were thought to be totally fixed, all heredity, we know

they're malleable and that, with the right kinds of experiences, you can start to develop these skills. And that's been something that I've been interested in working with for the last ten or fifteen years or so.

And that's how I got first in contact with the Algebra Project and Bob Moses. And we set up a project in Petersburg, and they came in and—I mean, Bob Moses was an early civil rights leader with SNCC in the 1960s, and he was involved in a lot of the voter registration programs [1:00:00] and things that went on in Mississippi. And then, he later got a PhD in math from Harvard, and he was dissatisfied with the way in which his own kids were experiencing math in the Cambridge schools. So, he developed these approaches to teaching abstract mathematical concepts in ways that are based on the experiences, the life experiences of children, and he's been very successful in doing that.

But he also takes a civil rights approach to school reform, in that he uses the same kinds of principles of community organization around support for schools, that it's not just the schools or the teachers by themselves that can bring about change, but it takes a whole community effort.

DC: Of bringing in the parents and the community—?

OH: Community, right. Exactly. Yeah, so that's been very interesting.

DC: And that, I mean, connects back to your experience of the way that you read about slavery, what you said before—the kinds of materials that are presented to students.

OH: Yes, right.

DC: We did an interview with a woman in California, Mildred Pitts Walter, who was an educator in the Los Angeles system in the forties and fifties, fifties, really, and was looking for storybooks with black kids in them to teach the black kids in her class.

OH: Right.

DC: And there were no such things.

OH: Right.

DC: So, she wrote her own.

OH: [Laughs] Right.

DC: And made it into a career. It's that kind of—yeah, it's interesting.

OH: Yeah.

DC: So, what kind of effects can that have? Can you measure and see change when you do introduce materials like that?

OH: Yes, you can. I mean, one of the things that we're always looking for is transfer, like if you work in the cognitive domain, and you're trying to develop cognitive skills, per se, through practice of things like attention and short-term memory and those kinds of activities, do you get transfer to performance in math or in other things? And we find that you do. You do need content, as well. But it's like the cognitive training is like building the framework, and then you still need the content to fit into that framework. But without the framework, there's nothing for the content to adhere to. And so, students in general today tend to—you know, even high-performing students—tend to have all these unorganized concepts that aren't integrated in any kind of way, aren't able to do any kind of abstraction from those concepts. And a lot of it is from the lack of that development of the underlying cognitive framework.

And, you know, in general there's kind of been a dumbing-down of education in the country over the years. When I went to Chandler when I was twelve or thirteen, I mean, this might seem just being a parent reality, because of my advancing age, but [laughs] it *seems* as if the educational rigor was higher than it is with college kids these days, you know, and in terms of both the breadth and the depth of information that we were exposed to. And I think part of that

is in terms of the teacher pool. I think part of it is in terms of educational experience. I think part of it is some unintended consequences from well-meaning liberal teachers who didn't have the right level of expectation for black students.

My mother was an educator for years, and I can remember her saying that in the sixties when they started to have the integrated schools that these teachers weren't holding the kids to the same standards that the black teachers were holding the kids to. And so, there was this—I mean, George Bush, you know, I don't agree with him on very many things, but he came up with one phrase that I thought was pretty apt. And that was, and I can't remember the phrase now, but it was something about the "high prejudice of low expectations," or something like that. And I think that's true. You know, the self-esteem movement and the social-passing movement—I don't know if you can call them movements, but they tended to be trends in education—I think have done a lot of damage. And I think a lot of that came from well-meaning people worried about the ability of these poor little black kids [1:05:00] in the inner city and what they could and could not do. And most of the studies you read about minority education that works, instead of dumbing down a curriculum to remediate any lacking information, is producing a challenging curriculum, you know, producing something that's going to stretch their capabilities. And students tend to respond to expectations.

DC: How challenging is that, especially in the state of Virginia, and given our ironically-named SOLs, our Standards of Learning, to really effect change in both the curriculum and in the pedagogy?

OH: It's extremely challenging. And that's been one of the problems with a school district like Petersburg. It's hard to come in and, you know, try to institute some innovation when everything is about the test scores, you know. And, you know, I mean, the curriculum is so

drained of any kind of intellectually stimulating content. It's all about performance on the test. And I think the lower-performing schools, this disproportionately affects them, in terms of how they spend their resources and their time.

DC: You know, I know that, you know, whoever is going to be watching this doesn't want to hear *me*, but [laughs] this conversation is something that, you know, I'm passionate about as an educator in the, you know, Virginia Tech college system, or the Virginia college system at Virginia Tech. We work really closely with the local high school students and we've been trying a lot to bring in African American history, civil rights history, just did a whole teach-in on Booker T. Washington, of all people. And, you know, the teachers are hungry for it.

OH: Right.

DC: But we hear again, "Where am I going to put it? How am I going to teach it?" You know?

OH: That's right, yeah. How will it affect the SOLs? Yeah.

JB: And there's nothing to make it exciting. It's just the drudgery of memorizing facts.

OH: It's very great drudgery, yes.

DC: So, they're frustrated and they willingly come to these teacher workshops. You know, they have very few days or time off, and they take that time to learn more. And then, the last question at the end of the day is always—

OH: Yeah.

DC: "So, okay, this was great for *me*."

OH: Right. [Laughs]

DC: "How do I—you know, how can I carve out an hour, you know, of a lesson plan?"

OH: Yeah, it's true. And so, it's probably going to take some kind of, you know, radical restructuring of education. I mean, the old kind of, you know, industrial-age model, or factory model of schools is probably passé now. We need to come up with some new approach in general, not one-size-fits-all kind of thing.

JB: I'm going to close the file.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: Okay. Well, [laughs] where else would you like to take this? I wonder if there's anything related to this that you would like to speak about, or reflecting back?

OH: Umm, let's see if there's anything we haven't covered. I mean, I guess the only thing additionally I would like to say is just that I am optimistic. I do think that we will rebound from all of this. It will just be relatively slow. But we do need to—you know, we are starting to see a little bit of a movement toward innovation in education. And even though it's an entrenched kind of bureaucracy and it's going to be slow to change, I think change is inevitable, both for K through Twelve education and higher education. I mean, the university as we know it now probably is not going to exist for that much longer with the, you know, the explosion of online courses and [1:09:11] and, you know, whatever the next innovation is going to be.

JB: Well, that challenge is what education is all about, because like, for me, it was a few inspiring teachers. It didn't matter what they were teaching. It was the example of their person.

OH: Right.

JB: And, you know, I can—if I want to learn a piece of software or two new chords on the guitar, I can go to my computer. But that's not the same as working with someone.

OH: It is true, yeah. And I think that was one of the things that I think has been the biggest change from teachers when I was growing up to teachers I see now, is the excitement about the knowledge, you know, and being able to pass on that excitement. It definitely wasn't rote and it wasn't, you know, something that was just for performance on a test. [1:10:00] But they would excite you about the ideas and excite you about the concepts.

DC: So, where do you put that insight, then, into the Civil Rights—you know, the big picture of the Civil Rights Movement? I mean, where there was a lot of focus—I think rightly so, and you probably agree—on changing the school system as it *was*. But what does that mean as to—are we still fighting—[laughs] what are we—?

OH: I mean, we are still—in a way we are still kind of fighting the same battle. I mean, it's just changed its form a little bit. So, instead of racial segregation, now we have class segregation. And, you know, I think the state of our schools, particularly our inner city schools, is a national disgrace. And the fact that we have allowed this to happen, and that we allow students to go to schools in conditions that are just deplorable. You know, we talk about having education as a high priority, but we don't put the action behind that. And we always find the money for whatever, you know, we feel is a necessity. Somehow, we found a trillion dollars to fight a war in Iraq, you know. [Laughs] That was off the books, so to speak. I mean, if we put those kind of resources into education, I mean, it's just—

DC: And we find scholarships for athletes.

OH: Yeah.

DC: But not for the—you know, not always for those who are merit-based.

OH: Yeah. But I do think that education today is kind of the legacy of the civil rights struggle of the last few years. So, I think this is where the battleground, so to speak, of the

continuing struggle is going to be, and that we have to, not only get the political will, but the popular awareness of the need for change. And it's interesting. A lot of the organizations who were the main movers and shakers in the civil rights era need to change their approach and change their tactics. I mean, now we mobilize when somebody uses the n-word or, you know, there's national outrage. Where's the outrage over the conditions that these kids are going to school in, you know? We need that kind of leadership and direction.

JB: And the outrage over the disproportionate number of black men in prison.

OH: Yes! And I think all these things are related. I mean, the prison-industrial complex and the war on drugs, you know, has definitely related to the collapsing family structures and the educational system in the inner cities. So, it's like all these things are part of the mix. And we all—you know, the interesting book about the new Jim Crow is about the prison system.

DC: I thought that was—that was a perfect summation. Thanks. [Laughs]

JB: [Laughs] Yeah.

OH: [Laughs] Good.

DC: Turning to the courtroom [1:13:06]. Anything else you want to add? This has been terrific.

OH: No, I think I'm good.

DC: Well, thank you so much.

JB: I still have two hours left on the tape.

DC: If we could—

OH: [Laughs] Oh, shoot the breeze some more!

DC: That was fantastic! Thank you very much.

Unidentified Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

[Recording ends at 1:13:30]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council